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ABSTRACT

Attention to small schools in Manitoba reflects concern for rural development, recognition of cultural pluralism, awareness of benefits of small town living, and a growing scepticism about benefits of consolidation which have led to an appreciation of traditional small school educational practices. The challenge for small school educators is to insure that the increased attention is properly directed so that small schools will endure when interest wanes. Information from large urban schools cannot be used as benchmarks to examine small rural schools, and established theories of administration cannot be applied to a small rural context. Small schools differ from large schools not only in size, but also in environment and community factors. Rural school staffing problems may require certifying teachers for small schools, matching teacher characteristics with small school needs, and developing inservice activities. Development of curriculum materials for small rural settings must assume that small is unique, that more resources to buy more materials is not the only answer, and that students should receive quality materials designed for them and delivered in ways appropriate to the environment. Improvement of small school education includes placing responsibility for change upon the community with support from, but not dependency on, central educational agencies. (LFL)

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From Survival to Serendipity; Small Schools In The 80's

Plenary Address: Small Schools Workshop

Brandon, January 26, 1984

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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Introduction

The organizers of this conference were quite helpful in narrowing down the substance of my address when they chose the title From Survival to Serendipity; Small Schools in the 80's. Actually, survival I understood,but serendipity? I wasn't sure if I was suppose to write a speech or open a boutique. Despite what the organizers may have had in mind with this title, what I will do is to primarily address the issue of small schools in the 80's. I will concentrate on this part of the title because that is what you and I are involved with right now and because I would like to think that a good portion of my present job is to both play the futurist and to provide some leadership in identifying and meeting challenges facing small school educators in the 80's.

Survival and Serendipity

The future does, of course, evolve largely from both the present and the past, and the descriptors survival and serendipity correctly reflect the past and the present with regard to small schools. Survival refers to the decades of consolidation where it was believed that small was a handicap and large was progressive. Many small schools did not survive this era. Serendipity refers to a subsequent era represented by a growing realization that there may be some good reasons for preserving small schools. These reasons seem to have grown from two sources. First, from the small schools or rural locations themselves were things like; a concern for rural development, a recognition of cultural pluralism and a general awareness of the benefits of small town/community living. Second was a growing scepticism in the supposedly progressive and larger urban

school settings themselves about the eschewed benefits of the consolidated school. Rising instances of school vandalism, increasing problems with discipline, and a perceived decline in school standards are presented as evidence justifying this scepticism. One interesting serendipitous discovery was the realization that large urban schools were increasingly embracing traditional small, rural, one room school educational practices such as individualized instruction, cross-age or family grouping and peer tutoring. In this case I am reminded of the cartoon I saw in an educational magazine of an architect presenting to the school board his graphic conception of the perfect school...a sketch of a one room school.

The reactions to these serendipitous discoveries has been quite diverse. For instance, legislation has been passed in Norway which says that no school in that country is allowed to have more than 450 students. In North America an awareness by public educators both that small is here to stay and that small has some redeeming features has at the very least resulted in three things: 1) stopping or at least the slowing down of the closing of small schools (eg. Manitoba policy on closure of small schools) 2) the injection of extra resources in the small schools (eg. in Manitoba the small schools support program) and 3) a substantial increase in the "small is beautiful" rhetoric.(eg. this speech??)

Putting it in another way, small rural schools are becoming the "in thing" of the 80's. It is becoming chic for bureaucrats, politicians, professors and educational administrators to talk about how important small schools are. Now this is all fine since government and academic attention to small rural schools is long over due. But my caution, and the major theme of this address, is that the major challenge for the small school educator in the 80's is to ensure that this increased attention is

properly directed. As one writer suggested, we are like a dog who has been chasing cars for years and has finally caught one. Now he has to decide what to do with it. Small school educators have been trying to get the attention of policy makers, bureacrats and academics for decades, and now that you have their attention what do you want to do with it?

I believe that today in Manitoba we are at a very critical point regarding decisions on small rural schools. We have some choices to make. We can ride this minor renaissance by getting additional resources for this year, and perhaps next year, or we can ride it by beginning some work in the small schools area that will endure when this interest wave has subsided.

In the balance of my address I would like to examine some issues in the small schools area in order to both illustrate this message and to identify some assumptions from which we might all work together in the 80's.

Defining

Before getting into more operational issues such as administration and curriculum, it might be appropriate to briefly consider what it is we mean by small. In Manitoba we have put a very definitive formula to small, a necessary act when there is a beginning and a end to the distribution of money. But despite formulas, perceptions about what is small vary. Norway decided that 450 students was some kind of cutoff point. If we used the definitions in some U.S. locations then all of Manitoba's schools would be small schools. For instance, I recently found an article title in a journal called "Delivering Support Services In The Small High School". With great anticipation I hungrily

searched out the article and found that this small high school had 800 students, a full time principal and vice principal as well as a full time guidance counsellor, psychologist, social worker and learning consultant. They certainly had support services but they certainly weren't small from a Manitoba perspective. Small also took a different perspective for me when I was in New Delhi, India recently and I had a tour of a school with 4,500 students. How then should we define small? As formulas go,the grant formula in Manitoba is a good one.It defines 275 of our schools as small and reflects to a large degree an instructional definition. That is, it reflects in most instances the occurance of less than the one teacher to one grade situation . However, for the functional purposes of research, training, administration, curriculum development and organization, small involves more than school size, since such issues as community size, geographical location and sociol-economic factors all mix together to provide the context for the school.

My first assumption then, is that we must accept the fact that being small is usually associated with environmental and community factors such as being rural perhaps being isolated. Redefining of small must encompass symptoms as well as numbers.

Defining small by means of a set of symptoms or problems is not easy. It is, however, the basis of all subsequent work in research, administration organization, staffing, training, grouping development and government services in the small schools area. Lets begin by looking at administrating, managing and organizing.

Administering, Managing and Organizing

I would like to begin here with a story about one of my graduate students when I was at the University. I think he is here today since he is a small school principal so I won't embarass him by telling you

his name. We'll just call him Harvey. Harvey wanted to do research on the small school principal, in particularly the role of the teaching principal in a small rural location. To do this Harvey went to the library and dutifully studied all the literature on role definitions for principals and from this literature developed an extensive check-list of the kinds of things that principals do and the kinds of problems they have. Harvey's intention then was to take this extensive check-list and role description and have a select group of teaching principals location react to and discuss these particular roles. From their reaction and discussion he felt he would be able to define the role of the teaching principal. Now this sounds quite reasonable until you think about what Harvey would end up with if he did this study. I would suggest that he would have a collection of the perceptions of teaching principals in small rural locations about what principals of large schools in urban locations do on their jobs. I don't think Harvey would have discovered much about the teaching principal or at the very least what he would have discovered were those areas of overlap between the teaching principal in a rural location and the principal of a large school in an urban location. My point is that using information from a large urban school setting as the benchmark upon which to examine a small rural setting was and is inappropriate and will not only likely make the small rural school situation look in some way deficient, but will result in missing what might in fact be the unique problems of the teaching principal in a small rural situation.

Let me tell you another story about administrative theory and the small rural school. When I was at the University I taught courses on organizational theory, management practices and organizational behaviour as they apply to educational institutions. In these classes I had many principals from small rural locations. In fact I recognize in this room

today many individuals whom I have had the privilege of working with at the graduate level. A few years before I joined the university, however, I worked in the divisional office of a small division of 13 small schools the largest of which had ten teachers and the smallest of which had two. I remember walking in to one of these schools, one with four teachers(two teaching couples),and just as I walked in the front door a book went flying past my face down the hallway. I was certainly surprised if not intimidated, but not as nearly surprised as I was when I looked at one end of the hall and saw the principal and looked at the other end of the hall and saw his wife and realized that the two were heaving things at each other from one end of the hall to the other. Now, I always did and I still do, have some difficulty putting together what I was teaching in my organizational theory and organizational behaviour classes and this episode and other less violent behavior of the 13 principals of these small schools. Certain unique situations arise for instance, when one spouse is the principal and the other a teacher. Clinical supervision takes on a whole different meaning when the post observation discussion takes place in bed. I can certainly tell you that Maslow, Hertzberg and Sergiovanni did not write their hypotheses with my wife in mind.

My point is of course that it must be with extreme caution that we apply established theories of administration, management and organization to the small rural context. Recent research, for instance, on the transferability of organizational theories and practices across culturels is throwing into considerable disarray any contention to the universality of administration theory.

This gives rise to a second assumption upon which to base our work in small schools. Accept the fact that small schools are different from large schools and this difference is more than one of size, but perhaps one of "culture."

With regard to administrative and organizational issues, it is evident that small size, low population density and rural social structures are not concomitant with the atypical, textbook public school system that was developed, and is suited to, an urban setting. The challenge of the 80's is to find an organizational arrangement somewhere between this large urban design and the old room school that will provide the best educational-community fit.

Staffing, Professional Development and Professional Preparation

One of the most common problems expressed by small rural educators are those related to staffing. A quick look at the teaching population in Manitoba certainly points out some distinct differences between the rural and urban areas with nonurban teachers being younger and less experienced. Primarily at issue in the past has been the turn over rate of teachers in small rural areas. However, as most of you are aware, mobility today isn't what it use to be. What I am now hearing from many administrators is not that people are leaving, but that some are staying. People who came to rural and small locations with the intention of going back to the city after a couple of years are finding that they now can't get there. Consequently some unhappy teachers find themselves in a teaching situation for which they were not prepared and have no desire in which to continue. The problem, of course, rests with past and present approaches to the training, hiring and professional development of teachers in small rural areas.

Neither, this province or any other province in Canada that I know of has developed any sustained activity in any of these areas. In Manitoba with 275 small schools, decreasing availability of urban jobs and changes in teacher tenure regulations, more new graduates are seeking and taking and staying with jobs in rural/small locations/ - some against their will. Once again is the point that being a teacher in a small rural community is not the same as being a teacher in a large urban setting. Faculties of Education

should recognize this and establish as part of training programs, courses or projects to address the tactics of teaching in, for instance, a multigraded classroom. The administrators in small school divisions should recognize this and require in prospective teachers things like the willingness and desire to actively participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, the willingness to and the ability to be subject matter generalists certified to teach a number of subjects, and other easily identifiable requirements of teaching in small rural locations. The Teachers' Society and others involved in professional development should recognize this and develop an approach to inservice and professional development activities that draws heavily on local skills and resources.

I could go on for a long time about such small school staffing issues as certifying teachers to teach in small schools, the need for student teaching in small schools, and matching teacher characteristics with small school needs. I think we could all agree that this is the singular most important issue in any school. Perhaps the most important point however, is an assumption that our challenge in the 80's is not in the procurement of more staff, but in the procurement of staff that is better trained, best suited and continually supported for the unique environment of small, rural schools.

Curriculum Materials and Programs

The dilemmas in curriculum, curriculum materials and programs are certainly the hardest to address. The most obvious problem is a shortage of curriculum materials designed for the small rural school setting. Curriculum developers and textbook companies have ignored small school needs, perhaps because numbers limit efficiency and profitability or perhaps because they assume that small schools were just scaled down versions of large schools and the curriculum should be the same.

Whatever the reason there will be movements in the 80's to create more locally relevant curriculum and this is certainly a noble challenge. However, part of this challenge will be to define what locally relevant curricula means. I have worked in several cultures as a curriculum developer and as a director of curriculum in one, and in each instance locally developed curricula has meant everything from simply changing the pictures in the textbooks or the primers or the workbooks to basing a content and methodology on a completely different view of social reality.

If the definition is the former, then the task is tedious but not complex. If the definition approaches the latter, it reflects the assumption that (1) smallness as unique in more than just size and, (2) that more resources to buy more materials is not the only answer, and (3) students in small rural locations should receive a quality education designed for them rather-then receive a second hand program defined by large urban standards. Now before you nod your heads in passive agreement, we had better examine the collorary to these assumptions. In the first instance, developing or matching curriculum to local needs is hard, tedious and not immediately gratifying work. In the second instance, most small school districts have neither the time, appropriate personnel of financial resources to write their own curriculum and prepare their own materials. It is, however, the kind of effort that will have sustaining results.

The second most obvious problem is the general issue of the breadth of curriculum offerings. This is of major concern at the high school level as small high schools struggle to offer as wide a range of course options as possible. In some locations the attempt to replicate the course offerings of a large high school has resulted in a very thin stretching of staff resources and consequently a small high school that looks like a lousy

large high school. Once again, dollar resources in the form of more teachers or supplies might help but they are obviously not the only answer, since the amount of money available is not sufficient, or ever will be sufficient for small high schools to replicate the total range of course offerings at a large urban high school.

Does this mean that the small rural school will always be playing catch up and will be permanently relegated an inferior status with regard to breath of offerings? The answer is probably yes if the small school continues to use the large urban high school delivery model as a benchmark. It is no, if small schools pay particular attention to the identification of delivery systems which are appropriate to their context, and in doing so make use of their environment to establish unique programs. This again is no easy task and involves things like using the community as a learning resource, voluntary sharing and adapting technologically based alternatives to provide specialized and diverse learning opportunities.

Providing Government Support

Finally and it appropriately follows a discussion of curriculum implementation and development is the place of government or Department of Education support in the future of small rural schools.

Evidence of either past neglect, or again simply the assumption that small and rural is not unique, is the fact that up to 1980 only three states in the whole U.S. and not one province in Canada,that I know of,had created divisions of their Department of Education whose purpose was to concentrate on improvement of small, rural schools. Since then I believe two other states have followed and in September Manitoba took Canadian leadership in this area by creating the Regional Services Branch and making part of it's mandate the area of small-rural schools and

and school divisions. As you are well aware, Manitoba has also taken leadership in the past two years in providing badly needed extra resources to small schools through the Small Schools Support Program.

One of our first jobs in Regional Services has been to determine what our approach to small schools should be and the message of my address today reflects much of, at least, my thinking in this area. Let me repeat the main message of my address.

We are in the midst of the minor rennaissance in the small schools area. Bureacrats, politicians, and academics are beginning to champion your cause as they serendipitously discover that small is now beautiful. I would suggest that anyone who thinks that small is beautiful has both never worked in a small school longer than a week and misunderstands the original coinage of the term as it referred to developmental economics in the early 70's. Small schools do have a lot of good things about them but in just as many ways small schools are the "pits". A new slogan perhaps? Small is the beautiful pits? Furthermore, the original meaning of 'small is beautiful' as it was used by Schumacher in his book of the same title was that small is unique...not good or bad...just unique and in being so deserved a unique approach. I believe that it is this approach that will ensure that the efforts made during this time of support result in lasting effects - lasting improvements, in the small schools area.

In order to do this and guide all of our work in this area I would suggest to you the following criteria, preconditions or perhaps assumptions about the uniqueness of small school education and the process for sustaining movements to improve small school education.

1) Small schools and their communities often tend to operate as a single, integrated social structure.
2) Small school reality means creating policies that reflect rural and small cultures rather then trying to reshape these schools into a likeness of larger schools.

3) Responsibility for moving ahead in the small schools area must be placed upon those working and living in the small or rural community setting.

4) Local and small school jurisdictions cannot head out on their own without considerable support from central educational agencies and other educational professionals throughout the community.

5) Care must be taken that whatever intervention strategies are adopted, that they contribute to building a local development capacity and not to a dependency upon any central educational agency.

There are busy and heady times ahead for small school educators in Manitoba and these will be productive times if we keep in mind that we all share the same goal, and this goal is the planning and implementation of education programs to help students become prepared for a meaningful role in our society. The size of the school from which the students graduate should not mitigate this preparation.